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SUBJECT: U/S DOBRIANSKY'S MEETINGS IN KUWAIT: WOMEN IN
SCIENCE, DEMOCRATIZATION, TIP, POLIO, AND GCC PLUS TWO

REF: KUWAIT 0039

Classified By: CDA Matthew H. Tueller for reasons 1.4(b) and (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: Under Secretary Paula Dobriansky visited Kuwait January 9 to participate in the Women Leaders in Science, Technology, and Engineering Conference (reftel). She also met with key Kuwaiti governmental and non-governmental figures. Dr. Ma'asouma Al-Mubarak, the first and only female minister in Kuwait's history, told U/S Dobriansky that USG support has been beneficial to the promotion of women's rights but that USG intervention in Kuwaiti domestic politics was an extremely sensitive topic and therefore the involvement of non-governmental groups was essential. Al-Mubarak also noted an upcoming meeting she had with the Minister of the Interior and Kuwaiti airlines in response to security concerns at the airport that had been raised by United Airlines security staff.

¶2. (C) Summary Continued: Kuwait Foundation for the Advancement of Sciences (KFAS) Director Ali Al-Shamlan described current areas of cooperation with U.S. institutions and expressed a will to expand such cooperation. MP Mohammad Jassem Al-Sager warned that direct support of democracy-building would be seen as unwelcome meddling in Kuwaiti internal affairs, and called for dialogue between conflicting parties in Iraq and Lebanon, as well as between Iranians and Arabs. Foreign Minister Shaykh Dr. Mohammad Al-Sabah Al-Sabah noted that the GCC 2 countries were concerned that Iraq's government was ruling on a sectarian basis. He said he was willing to support U.S. objectives on polio eradication, TIP, UNSCR 1737, and supporting the Lebanese government. Prime Minister Shaykh Nasser Mohammad Al-Sabah told the U/S and a group of other high-level participants from the conference that he supported the conference and its goals fully and encouraged follow-up activities. Finally, in a lunch held at the Ambassador's residence, a group of six women's rights activists lamented the influence of Islamists and called for improvements in education as well as women's political training. End summary.

Dr. Ma'asouma Al-Mubarak, Communications Minister

¶3. (C) Under Secretary Dobriansky met with Minister of Communications Dr. Ma'asouma Al-Mubarak to discuss the Women Leaders in Science, Technology, and Engineering conference that Kuwait hosted January 8 - 10. Al-Mubarak expressed her gratitude for U.S. assistance and noted that networking was especially important for women scientists in the Middle East. She said our two governments should expand cooperation in advancing women in science rather than being satisfied with one conference. Al-Mubarak noted that the Prime Minister's sponsorship of the conference is a strong signal that Kuwait attaches great importance to the support of women in science.

The Under Secretary asked for Al-Mubarak's ideas about productive next steps. Al-Mubarak said conferences such as this one and professional scientific exchanges were especially important.

¶4. (C) Al-Mubarak under-scored the usefulness of working through NGOs citing Kuwaiti sensitivity to explicit U.S. involvement in areas related to domestic Kuwaiti politics. Too much outside interference in a particular candidate's activities can taint her and open her up to political attacks. Therefore, she said, cooperation in non-overtly political activities, like this science conference, were especially useful. Al-Mubarak thanked the U/S for the help that the USG provided to encourage women's participation and improve female candidates' effectiveness in the 2006 elections. In particular, Kuwaiti women need training to improve their effectiveness in campaign management and media relations. The Ambassador affirmed that the USG always tries to find local partners to take the lead on democracy promotion efforts to avoid offending local political sensibilities.

¶5. (C) The U/S thanked the Minister for her help in resolving a long-standing billing dispute with AT&T. Al-Mubarak said negotiations were almost complete on augmenting AT&T's network between Kuwait and the UAE. She added that on January 3 the Ministry received a memo from the AT&T office in Abu Dhabi confirming that the issue of linkage between Kuwait and Fujaira had been settled. She noted that outside carriers usually pay linkage charges, but the GOK had settled the issue and paid the charges itself. Everything is now ready for business, she said, and the GOK is eager to move forward.

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¶6. (C) The U/S also expressed U.S. appreciation for the Ministry's cooperation in facilitating United Airlines' establishment of non-stop service from Washington. Al-Mubarak said she hoped that other U.S. airlines could also establish service under the Open Skies agreement. She noted that she would be meeting with the Ministry of Interior, the Civil Aviation Authority, and Kuwait Airways later in the day to improve security shortcomings at the airport that had been noticed by United Airlines. She criticized the Ministry of Interior for its laxity in addressing these concerns but assured the U/S that there would be improvements "within days, not weeks."

KFAS Director Ali Al-Shamlan: Continued Science Cooperation

¶7. (C) After thanking the Kuwait Foundation for the Advancement of Science (KFAS) for its financial backing of the conference, the U/S asked KFAS director Dr. Ali Al-Shamlan what next steps he envisioned in order to continue the momentum that the conference had built. Al-Shamlan pointed to a number of areas in which KFAS already cooperates with US institutions, citing partnerships with Harvard University for exchange programs in business, public health and education and his plan to expand these exchanges in the coming year. He also pointed to KFAS efforts to establish programs (with Harvard and/or the University of Miami) to study diabetes, which has become an epidemic in Kuwait. The Ambassador suggested that specific programs for science and math education for girls would be especially useful. Al-Shamlan noted that the Amir had mentioned improving education in his October speech to parliament and had tasked KFAS to play an important role. The U/S urged Al-Shamlan to lead the effort to ensure that there were actionable follow-on activities to the conference. She also expressed her hope that KFAS could continue its long-standing cooperation with the National Science Foundation, and look into creating new relationships with the National Academy of Sciences, the American Association for the Advancement of Science and other U.S. scientific institutions.

18. (C) The U/S met with self-described liberal MP Mohammad Jassem Al-Sager, the chairman of the parliament's Foreign Relations Committee and the head of the Arab Parliament. She noted recent developments in Kuwaiti democracy and asked the MP about future reform. Al-Sager said the Government stubbornly resists change and only relents as a result of intense pressure from the parliament and the media. He went on to say that economic reform should precede political reform, criticizing the lack of progress on privatization, development of Project Kuwait (an \$8.5 billion project to develop oil fields in the North of the country; it is politically sensitive because it involves heavy foreign investment), and an international investment law. Al-Sager said the Government was more concerned with telling the public what it wants to hear than taking wise decisions based on the country's long-term interest. For instance, after failing to pass women's voting rights in 1999, the Government stalled for another six years before it mustered the political will to pass the law. In 2006, the Government opposed the revamping of Kuwait's electoral district but then supported the exact same law after new elections proved that the government's position was unpopular.

19. (C) Al-Sager went on to say that the legalization of political parties is the most important political reform. The Ambassador raised the possibility that this might lead to increased Islamist control of politics since the Islamists are better organized than other political groups. Al-Sager responded that the Islamists would benefit initially, but that people would quickly tire of them once they came into office and the liberals would surge.

110. (C) The U/S asked how the USG could help to encourage political reform. In the Kuwaiti context, Al-Sager urged the USG to stay out of Kuwaiti domestic affairs because American policies in Iraq and Israel/Palestine had tarnished the image of the U.S. He expressed skepticism whether even non-official assistance (e.g. through NGOs) would be beneficial. On the regional level, Al-Sager suggested symposia between parties to Middle Eastern conflicts would be useful. He suggested a session in Kuwait to bring together Iranians and Arabs, a session in Qatar to bring Iraqi factions together, and a session in Saudi Arabia to gather Lebanese parties. Lastly, he added that including Americans not currently in Government, such as James Baker and Lee

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Hamilton, in these symposia might also be helpful.

111. (C) U/S Dobriansky encouraged the Kuwaiti parliament to take up the issue of Trafficking in Persons (TIP). With clarification of the U.S. definition of TIP, Al-Sager agreed that TIP was a crucial issue and offered several examples of abuse faced by maids in Kuwait. Al-Sager assured the U/S that he would push anti-TIP legislation in the parliament.

FM Helps on Conference Visas, Inquires about Student Visas

112. (C) The Foreign Minister expressed his support for the conference and inquired as to whether visa problems for the Turkish participants had been solved. The U/S said they had, but that Iraqi participants were having trouble. The Foreign Minister said he would look into it. (Note: several hours later, an Iraqi participant received a visa. End note.) The Minister added that he hoped there would be significant follow-up activities to the conference. Returning to the issue of visas, the Minister raised what he called "overly harsh treatment" by the Department of Homeland Security of Kuwaiti students studying in the U.S., citing an example of two Kuwaitis in custody on technicalities, and said it was discouraging Kuwaitis from wanting to study in the United

States.

FM: GCC 2 will Express Concern over Maliki Sectarianism

¶13. (C) The Minister said he was looking forward to President Bush's upcoming speech on a revised strategy for Iraq as well as to seeing Secretary Rice at the GCC 2 meeting on January 16. He said there were some minor issues with the text of the joint communique but that the GOK was pleased with it overall. He informed the U/S that Secretary Rice should expect to hear concerns about where democracy was leading Iraq. Some of the GCC 2, he said, see the current Maliki government as a sectarian regime rather than a democracy. The U/S said she would convey this message and that Secretary Rice would provide a full readout of the President's new policy. On Iraq, the Foreign Minister noted Kuwaiti interest in an LA Times interview with Henry Kissinger, in which he said the President had to choose between democracy and stability, and that the U.S. could not impose its values on other countries. The U/S cited the Secretary's Egypt speech, which rejected the

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stability/security dichotomy and emphasized that democratic transitions take time and are not without their ups and downs.

¶14. (C) On the execution of Saddam Hussein, the Foreign Minister noted the strong statements by Kuwaiti MPs in a special session of parliament which were critical of the reaction of the Arab street and the governments of Jordan, Yemen, and Libya for what they called the glorification of Saddam. In particular, he pointed to liberal MP Meshari Al-Anjari's statement as especially significant. Al-Anjari said there is something seriously wrong with Arab culture to see a "thug" like Saddam as a hero. He called for reform of educational curricula and a reconsideration of what kind of people are held up as role models in the region. This reaction by the "Arab Street," the Foreign Minister said, was evidence of frustration, and he cited an Arab proverb: "When matters are calm, wise men are heard. When matters are unsettled, evil rules." He said the President's determination to create a two-state solution to the Palestinian-Israeli crisis and his appointment of Secretary Rice to spearhead the effort were an especially important tool in eliminating that frustration.

Polio, Trafficking and Lebanon

¶15. (C) At the close of the meeting U/S Dobriansky raised three points. First, she urged that Kuwait contribute additional funds to global efforts to eradicate polio, offering to provide the Foreign Minister with a point of contact at UNICEF. The Foreign Minister believed Kuwait had already contributed but was amenable to further contributions. Second, she asked that the GOK look into improving anti-TIP legislation and providing a shelter for trafficking victims. The FM said he was very familiar with the issue from his time in New York and said he would pass the shelter issue on to the Minister of Social Affairs and Labor. Finally, the U/S expressed the USG's hope for Kuwaiti support on UNSCR 1737 and for continued support for the government of Lebanon. The FM said Kuwait was "100%" behind UNSCR 1737 and that he would tell this to the Iranians in a

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visit to Iran next week. He was optimistic that there would be progress at the next review of the mandate set out in UNSCR 1737 currently scheduled for March 2007.

Prime Minister: Committed to Women in Science

¶16. (U) The U/S, along with a small group of the most

prominent participants from the Women Leaders in Science, Technology and Engineering Conference met with Prime Minister Shaykh Nasser Mohammad Al-Sabah at his invitation. During the meeting the women were direct and outspoken about the need to continue to have conferences of this kind that focused on women as leaders in the fields of science and engineering. Several of the women said they were especially disappointed by the lack of work opportunities available to the many well-trained female science graduates in the Arab world. The Prime Minister expressed his appreciation for the women's concerns and promised his full support for future efforts. He noted his personal support for the current conference and offered to host next year's event and cited the possibility of making this an annual conference in Kuwait.

Lunch Meeting with Female Activists

¶17. (C) The Ambassador hosted a lunch for the U/S along with six of Kuwait's most prominent female activists:

- * Dr. Rola Dashti, head of the Kuwait Economic Society;
- * Dr. Badria Al-Awadhi, former Dean of Law at Kuwait University;
- * Dr. Fatima Abdali, Team Leader, Health, Safety, and Environment Group, Kuwait Oil Company
- * Dr. Nada Al-Mutawa, Professor, Political Science Department, Kuwait University
- * Dr. Moudhi Al-Hamoud, Rector of the Arab Open University;
- * Dr. Farida Al-Habib, Head of Cardiology, Kuwait Military Hospital

Comment: The discussion among this group of politically active and diverse women was frank and at some times heated (not all agree on where the problems are and how to fix them) and was evidence of a maturing dialogue on these issues in Kuwait. End Comment.

¶18. (C) Dr. Dashti started by saying that Kuwaiti women's participation in the 2006 elections was impressive and cut across all sectors of society. She said the elections have changed the discourse on women's issues causing male MPs to "say more of the right things," but regretted that so far the talk has not been translated into action. In particular, Rola emphasized how crucial it was for the next election to provide training so women could improve their use of the media in support of their political activities. She also noted that surveys she had carried out showed that 75% of Kuwaitis did not know the political affiliation of the candidates they voted for. She concluded that votes were based on the personal qualities of the candidates rather than their political leanings, and added that this provides a major opportunity for women. She also noted that elections like Egypt's and Palestine's were more of a protest than a real vote for Islamists.

¶19. (C) Dr. Moudhi Al-Hamoud lamented the state of education in Kuwait. She especially cited the influence of the Islamists, who she said are squeezing educational curricula and other areas of public life. She noted the importance of legalizing political parties since Islamists could fundraise through charities while liberals could not.

¶20. (C) Dr. Farida Al-Habib echoed the concerns about the fundamentalists, noting that they pulled down posters for a hypertension conference she was organizing due to their resentment of a woman enjoying professional success. She stated that she thinks the status of Kuwaiti women is actually worse than it was at the time of Kuwait's independence in 1961.

¶21. (C) Dr. Badria Al-Awadhi said that because of the focus on political participation, other areas of women's rights are being ignored. For example, there are erosions in women's rights in areas such as personal status but women are not paying attention to these threats. She noted that the fundamentalists have been able to attract more support among women than the liberals because they are more skilled in

making their appeals to Kuwaiti women.

¶22. (C) Dr. Nada Al-Mutawa stressed the importance of

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change coming from the highest levels of power. She recounted a recent trip to Riyadh and how she did not have to cover herself, attributing the change to King Abdullah's reining in of the morality police. She also pointed out that it was the personal involvement of then-Prime Minister (now Amir) Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah that pushed women's political rights through the parliament.

¶23. (C) Dr. Fatima Abdali, who like Rola Dashti ran a widely-respected campaign for parliament in 2006, said she favors the establishment of a quota to ensure women's election to the parliament. Although she originally opposed it on the grounds that women should win seats on their own merits, she now thinks that women serving in the parliament for a term or two is necessary to show men that women can serve effectively.

¶24. U/S Dobriansky cleared this message.

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